



Over 80,000 WW2 Prisoner of War Interrogation Questionnaires now open to the public for the first time

Press Release 21 December 2004

EMBARGOED FOR 2 JANUARY 2005

Donald Pleasence, who played Colin "the Forger" Blythe in the cult PoW film 'The Great Escape', is amongst the over 80,000 Prisoners of War whose Liberation Questionnaires are now available for the first time to the public at The National Archives in Kew, west London. These records offer a fascinating new insight into the lives of British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War held in Germany and Japan during the Second World War.

As well as giving personal and military details, these records can include:

- the date and place of capture;
- the camps and hospitals in which servicemen were imprisoned;
- any serious illnesses and medical treatment;
- interrogation after capture and details of bad treatment by the enemy;
- any escape attempts;
- sabotage by the PoWs of the enemy;
- any suspicions of other Allied prisoners collaborating with the enemy.

Liberated PoWs were also given the opportunity to bring to official notice any other matters, such as courageous acts by fellow prisoners or details of civilians who assisted them during escape and evasion activities. Sometimes the servicemen attached additional information like letters and reports on conditions in PoW camps.

The expert on Prisoners of War at The National Archives, Alan Bowgen, explains: "While the plans to interrogate all liberated PoWs were never realised, the records in WO 344

represent about half of those who survived captivity in Germany and Japan and provide the essential background information to allow former-PoWs and their families to do further research.

“We already have 16,000 escape, evasion and liberation reports from Italy and Germany available to the public at The National Archives. This means that records exist for about two thirds of servicemen who were captured by Italy or Germany.

“For British servicemen who were captured by the Japanese we also have 50,000 index cards in WO345 which the Japanese compiled. The personal details are in English, but the other information is in Japanese.

“All the records will be available to view in The National Archives reading rooms in Kew, from 4 January 2005. You do not need an appointment, but you need to know the name of the prisoner you are looking for and it is helpful to know other details such as unit, rank and service number.”

Notes to editors:

- **Other famous names include:**
 - Peter Butterworth, star of the “Carry On” films (WO 344/51)
 - Rupert Davis, who played the original “Maigret” (WO 344/85)
 - Douglas Bader, the pilot who was shot down and lost both his legs (WO344/13)
 - Field Marshall Haig’s son, now Lord Bemersyde (WO 344/128)
 - Charles Upham, winner of 2 Victoria Crosses (WO 344/325)
 - Eric Lomax, author of “The Railway Man”, which describes his experiences as a PoW working on the Burma-Siam railway. Fifty years later he met one of his torturers again. (WO 344/388)
 - Cartoonist Ronald Searle (WO 344/400)
 - Donald Pleasence’s reference is WO 344/254

- The National Archives www.nationalarchives.gov.uk in Kew, west London, has one of the largest archival collections in the world, spanning 1000 years of British history. It offers the public free access to vast collections of family history sources including military service records, ships’ passenger lists, slave registers and tax records. The Family Records Centre, in Islington, holds census information from 1841, wills and birth, death and marriage certificates. The research rooms at The National Archives and at the Family Records Centre are open to the public 6 days a week.

- **How to search the WO 344 Liberation Questionnaires:**

These records are arranged alphabetically by name sequences with separate sections for Germany and Japan. If you want to find a questionnaire, you need to look at the index to WO344 to find the document reference which covers the group of surnames that includes the person you are looking for. You will then get a folder of questionnaires which you can look through to see if a report survives. It can be very

disappointing if there isn't a record for the person you are interested in, but you must remember that not all liberated PoWs completed a form.

- **For more information please contact the National Archives Press Office on 020 8392 5277 or email clea.reilly@nationalarchives.gov.uk**